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The Religious Nature of Ethics

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the nature of ethical concepts, views, and theories and inquires in particular to what extent they may be considered religious. The analysis is not limited to the religious aspects of specific religious worldviews (such as Christianity). The concepts 'good' and 'dignity' are examined as representative examples. This is a meta-ethical issue, which may profitably be explored by examining the positions of representatives of moral realism, noncognitivism and ethical constructivism. The practical consequences of this inquiry are also discussed; to that end, the meaning of 'self-interest' is explored, and two varieties are introduced, namely, direct and indirect self-interest.

1 | Introduction

This paper inquires into the extent to which ethical concepts, views and theories may be distinguished from religious ones in the salient respect; a perspective is indicative of religious elements if an epistemic justification in presenting one's view is (partly) lacking, where a religious perspective may, in other words, be said to be complementary or even substitutive. The term 'religious' is accordingly used abstractly, so irrespective of the contents of *specific* worldviews that are considered religions (such as Christianity). This formulation is important as 'religion' may, depending on one's definition, be associated with, for example, certain rituals or the existence of one or more deities, on the basis of which it is indeed possible to distinguish between them, but such elements are irrelevant to the present inquiry. What the paper *does* focus on is the nature of the concepts that are decisive in ethical views and theories.

I will focus on the ideas of a number of important philosophers that may be considered representatives of the perspectives they espouse, namely, Kant, Nietzsche, Ayer, Moore, Mackie and Rawls. These thinkers have all exerted influence, but more significantly, their ideas lend themselves to fruitful analyses. That

given does not derogate from the added value of pointing to other thinkers who have contributed to the field of meta-ethics, especially because this has the advantage of presenting the relevant subfields in which they may be classified.

An important case, perhaps even the most important one, is the concept 'good', and it is this concept that is explored in particular in Section 2; because Moore has analysed it extensively, his ethical theory will be discussed in that light. Moore may be considered a representative of moral realism, which is characterised as "[...] roughly the view that there are moral facts and true moral claims whose existence and nature are independent of our beliefs about what is right and wrong." (Brink 1989, p. 7; cf. Brink 1989, p. 15 and Brink 1984, p. 111). As Moore's defence of moral realism is not the only possibility to uphold moral realism complemented by alternatives, it is appropriate to present his perspective in the relevant context. Moore's perspective is complemented by those of meta-ethicists whose analyses result in significantly different outcomes: Ayer and Mackie.

Ayer is usually considered a noncognitivist. Adherents of noncognitivism deny that moral statements express propositions, but alternative varieties to the one that may be found in Ayer's

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work are also defended. One such variety is quasi-realism, which will receive some attention in Section 2 as well. Taking the critical stance of Mackie seriously amounts to an impressive challenge for those who promote an ethical theory of any sort. It is not amiss to mention Nietzsche here, who may be considered a precursor to modern meta-ethicists, his principles and ideas vacillating, almost at the same pace as the aphorisms themselves, between ethics and meta-ethics. As he observes: “Every philosopher has hitherto believed to have founded morality; morality itself, however, was considered a ‘given’.”¹

What, then, is the nature of such concepts? This is the topic of Section 3. In this section, the possible religious character of ethical theories comes to the fore; the analysis again takes place against the backdrop of the position of relevant thinkers, and in particular, Kant, and one concept, in particular, is again the focus of attention, in this case, ‘dignity’.

If important concerns may be raised with respect to (the meaning of) ethical concepts, an alternative to account for individual actions may be welcome or even necessary. Section 4 presents such an alternative, in the form of self-interest, with two varieties, namely, direct and indirect self-interest. ‘Self-interest’ may be associated with immorality, but if what is argued is correct, ‘amorality’ is a more fitting characterisation. This view is presented in opposition to Rawls’ perspective, in comparison with which it may profitably be discussed, which may be characterised as ethical constructivism. It “[...] holds that moral objectivity is to be understood in terms of a suitably constructed social point of view that all can accept.” (Rawls 1980, p. 519).

2 | An Objective View on Ethics

The question ‘What is a good action?’ may be interpreted in two ways. The first is the sense it takes in ethics: ‘What is a good action?’ In this case, one tries to determine what it is that makes a certain action good, without problematising the meaning of the idea of ‘good’. The second is the sense it takes in meta-ethics, in which the idea *is* problematised: ‘What is a *good* action?’ Accordingly, Mackie speaks of a ‘second order view’, i.e., “[...] a view about the status of moral values and the nature of moral valuing, about where and how they fit into the world.” (Mackie 1977, p. 16). This is no mere academic issue: anyone who seeks to present a credible ethical account needs to make it clear what the basis of such an account is, or at least be willing to explore the issue. Absent that basis, the account would be lacking. This paper is focused on the issue of the feasibility of such a basis; the present section is focused on the idea of ‘good’.

The question can be explored from two perspectives. One may maintain that ‘good’ is something absolute and irreducible, having a meaning of its own, or, conversely, that any meaning it has can only be understood in relation to something else (like ‘pleasure’). Moore is an important proponent of the first perspective: ‘good’ has a meaning and cannot be reduced to (or defined in terms of) a natural quality. Those who attempt to do so commit what Moore calls the ‘naturalistic fallacy’ (Moore 1922, section 10 (p. 10), section 12 (p. 13), section 25 (p. 38)). One needs to know what ‘good’ means in order to be able to consider what qualities are good (Moore 1922, section 86 (p. 142)).

Moore argues that a proposition such as ‘pleasure is good’ indicates that ‘good’ has a meaning of its own lest a trivial tautology be at issue (namely, ‘pleasure is pleasure’), which is not the case (Moore 1922, section 11 (p. 12)); a synthetic (rather than an analytic) proposition is concerned (Moore 1922, section 6 (pp. 6, 7)). This argumentation may be considered compelling, but only if a meaning of ‘good’ is *presupposed*. Alternatively, one might hold: ‘pleasure (or another quality) is good’, meaning that ‘good’ is exhausted by pleasure and does not, in other words, have a (separate) meaning.

If ‘good’ does not denote something simple and indefinable and does not denote a complex, the only possibility that appears to remain is that it does not have a meaning (Moore 1922, section 13 (pp. 15–17)). The latter option is dismissed by Moore. He maintains: “[...] ‘good’ is a simple notion, just as ‘yellow’ is a simple notion; [...] just as you cannot, by any manner of means, explain to any one [*sic*] who does not already know it, what yellow is, so you cannot explain what good is.” (Moore 1922, section 7 (p. 7)). Importantly, however, ‘good’ can, in contradistinction to ‘yellow’, be reduced to something else. Moore says: “[...] whoever will attentively consider with himself what is actually before his mind when he asks the question ‘Is pleasure (or whatever it may be) after all good?’ can easily satisfy himself that he is not merely wondering whether pleasure is pleasant.” (Moore 1922, section 13 (p. 16)). This is a reiteration of the point that a synthetic proposition is concerned, but the question itself is nonsensical for someone who considers ‘good’ to be devoid of meaning, a possibility that cannot be ruled out; Moore does not prove that ‘good’ has a meaning but *presupposes* that it does.

One may wonder whether pleasure is (for example) beneficial in some cases, ‘beneficial’ being a synonym of ‘good’, but that does not entail committing oneself to the proposition that ‘good’ has some (or any) meaning. ‘Good’ is simply *identified* as (in this case) what is beneficial (so something natural), its (ethical) meaning being dissolved; ‘good’ would then be a synonym of whatever positive quality is identified and clarity may dictate that the term ‘good’ not be used as a synonym but only in the original sense (so in the domain of ethics), in which case it would, however, not be used either, for the reason already given, namely, that it has no apparent meaning. Moore does, in addition, appeal to ‘intrinsic value’ and ‘intrinsic worth’ (Moore 1922, section 13 (p. 17)), but using such notions amounts to explaining *obscurum per obscurius*.

Moore is an important proponent of what has come to be known as the non-naturalist variety of moral realism. It is not possible to discuss every perspective taken by moral realists here, but it is at least appropriate to mention the counterpart, naturalism, without the ambition of presenting even an overview of every possible perspective that has been taken or doing justice to the nuances at issue here.

Brink is an important representative of what is called the so-called naturalist variety of moral realism. His perspective resembles Moore’s but differs from it insofar as no appeal to a non-naturalist realm is concerned. In particular, he appeals to physical properties, maintaining that moral properties supervene upon natural (i.e., physical) properties (Brink 1984, pp. 118, 119). According to him, this supervenience is not strange,

just as there is nothing strange in (social) facts like unemployment, inflation and exploitation supervening upon physical facts (Brink 1984, p. 120).

The reference to such facts fails to address the crucial issue, however, which is not whether supervenience is possible, but rather whether that which supervenes is either reducible to something else or devoid of meaning, which cannot be said of unemployment, inflation, and exploitation, and similar social facts, while it may be true in the case of moral facts.

A proposal has been made to shift the focus to the normative importance of morality, and specifically the *purpose* or *meaning* of (human) life (Zhao 2020, p. 654). While constructive, such a proposal does not meet the burden of proof insofar as demonstrating the existence of moral facts is concerned but rather merely *shifts* it,² for it is now incumbent on the proponent to demonstrate the existence of the meaning itself. If the ‘meaning’ is specified by referring to certain contents, the same problem (with the same burden of proof) is at issue, while a ‘meaning’ that is *not* specified in an absolute sense but may be specified individually, so in accordance with various viewpoints, which seems to be what the author is arguing, by denying that the source of morality comprises the normativity of morality (Zhao 2020, p. 662), is compatible with so many options that it is difficult to see what its added value might be.

It is important to clarify what the foregoing amounts. I have not demonstrated that a notion such as ‘good’ does not have a meaning, but the burden of proof would not be on me to do so; instead, the opposite burden to prove that it does would be on those who appeal to such a notion. A perspective such as Ayer’s, which *would* provide the basis to reach this conclusion, is more rigorous than mine. Ayer maintains that ethical concepts are pseudo-concepts (Ayer 1936, pp. 110, 116). He may be associated with logical positivism, although he dissents from it in some respects (Ayer 1936, pp. 147–150). In any event, his account admits only propositions that are verifiable: “We say that a sentence is factually significant to any given person, if, and only if, he knows how to verify the proposition which it purports to express – that is, if he knows what observations would lead him, under certain conditions, to accept the proposition as being true, or reject it as being false.” (Ayer 1936, p. 16).

In line with this truth criterion, if one person differs with another with respect to the moral rightness or wrongness of a certain action, he does not contradict him: “[...] in saying that a certain type of action is right or wrong, I am not making any factual statement, not even a statement about my own state of mind. I am merely expressing certain moral sentiments. And the man who is ostensibly contradicting me is merely expressing his moral sentiments. So that there is plainly no sense in asking which of us is in the right. For neither of us is asserting a genuine proposition.” (Ayer 1936, pp. 110, 111). Accordingly, “[...] it is impossible to find a criterion for determining the validity of ethical judgements.” (Ayer 1936, p. 112).

Ayer rightly points to the relevant emotions in expressing a moral judgement, but an important element his theory cannot accommodate is given that *something* (which is not reducible to what Ayer considers decisive) is at issue, namely, that which is

defended or criticised (so that which is the bone of contention). If, for example, one individual contends that killing is (always) wrong while another maintains that it is (sometimes, in certain cases) right, they differ with respect to the correctness of the proposition “Killing is wrong.”

It is insufficient to refer to the existence of emotions alone, as it cannot account for the element with respect to which consensus exists, namely, (in the case of this example) the wrongness; while the interlocutors are in disagreement about whether killing is wrong, they agree about what it means for something to be wrong (lest the disagreement be nonsensical). This does not entail that it is clear what ‘wrong’ means, but that is not the issue at this stage, as the discussion is ethical rather than meta-ethical; analysing the issue (meta-ethically) is the next stage.

An alternative noncognitivist perspective is at issue in quasi-realism. While it is difficult to identify quasi-realism,³ and, related to that point, to state accurately how it relates to alternative views, it appears possible to consider it an attempt to find a middle way between the sort of noncognitivism defended by Ayer and (true) moral realism. One may argue, against this position, that it relies on ‘moral facts’ as fictions, and not just on the basis of a (too facile) nominal argument, by (simply) pointing to the meaning of ‘quasi’. Defending quasi-realism against such a stance, Blackburn maintains that this characterisation is misplaced, pointing out that it may be said that it is a fact that there are colours on account of their being observed (Blackburn 1993, pp. 55–57), and that arithmetical truths may be acknowledged without the need to acknowledge philosophical realism (Blackburn 1993, pp. 157, 158).

Yet while colours may indeed be said to ‘truly’ exist and arithmetical ‘truths’ may be acknowledged, if one suspends judgement with respect to the issue of whether moral facts are true—as moral realists would have it—while being unwilling to commit to fictionalism, a question that may be raised is in what (relevant) respect(s) quasi-realism may be distinguished from ethical constructivism, a perspective that will receive attention in Section 4, for if no adequate answer to this question is forthcoming, what will be observed there is pertinent to the present perspective. Regardless of that classificatory issue, however, the crucial issue is whether the ‘moral’ part of ‘moral facts’ must be identified as such, which is not the case (as it may, by contrast, be identified as something else).

It would be unwarranted to conclude on the basis of what has just been said that Moore’s account must, in spite of the objections to which it gave rise, be substituted for Ayer’s (or Blackburn’s), as this conclusion would constitute a false dilemma, because another account may be superior to both. A candidate to qualify as such an account could be Mackie’s theory. Even though I have focused and will continue to focus on meaning, Mackie’s perspective, in whose analysis of truth rather than meaning is decisive, is preferable to Ayer’s, which is, on account of what has been observed, insufficient to address what is at issue; at the same time, the problems involved in Moore’s account are avoided.

According to Mackie, “There are no objective values.” (Mackie 1977, p. 15). One may determine that something is ‘good’ insofar as it satisfies a desire, for example, but that does

not amount to proving that an objective value is concerned (Mackie 1977, p. 27). In line with what was observed above, Mackie maintains that moral judgements amount to a claim to objectivity (and, more precisely, objective values) and thus involve more than can be explained on the basis of an expressivist (or, more generally, any noncognitivist) account (Mackie 1977, pp. 33, 35) (such as Ayer's). This observation, that there is a claim to objectivity, must be distinguished from the situation in which evidence is produced that objective values do indeed exist.

A distinction between 'absolute values' and 'objective values' may be made: the former supposedly exists irrespective of any human conception or judgement, while the latter *may* exist in the same sense (in which case they are thus both objective and absolute values, stating this resulting in a superfluity, as synonyms are concerned), but *need not*, as it is sufficient for the claim that objective values exist to hold that a number of people are in agreement (even if this agreement is not universally shared, as the distinction is between 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity', so a relatively low threshold for objectivity pertains). This is a semantic issue, however, which would, as Mackie uses 'objectivity' in the same sense as 'absoluteness', lead to an unnecessary digression. I will therefore use the term 'objectivity'.

Mackie considers the issue of the existence of objective values as a 'moral sceptic' (Mackie 1977, p. 16), using an 'error theory' as the basis for denying the existence of objective values, "[...] a theory that although most people in making moral judgements implicitly claim, among other things, to be pointing to something objectively prescriptive, these claims are all false. It is this that makes the name 'moral scepticism' appropriate." (Mackie 1977, p. 35).

Mackie provides two reasons why there are no objective values, the 'argument from relativity' and the 'argument from queer-ness'. The first refers to the variation in moral codes that are accepted. Mackie rightly considers 'the argument from queer-ness' the more important argument. He observes: "If there were objective values, then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe." (Mackie 1977, p. 38). How might one know of the existence of such things? They are not encountered and lack descriptive meaning; failing the willingness to appeal to 'strange things' an appeal to intuitions would be necessary. Mackie is unwilling to accept this alternative; attacking Moore in particular for doing so, he remarks that 'a travesty of actual moral thinking' is involved (Mackie 1977, p. 38).

The word 'actual' indicates that Mackie considers a system of ethics that fails to correspond to a state of affairs in the world inadequate. His thesis that the verifiability principle—favoured by the logical positivists, including Ayer, if he may be identified as one (see Ayer 1936, pp. 147–150)—is inadequate (Mackie 1977, pp. 39, 40) can be understood in this context; if this principle were decisive, the outcome that 'queer' things might be found could not principally be ruled out. What is instead decisive is that it becomes clear how the values are connected with natural facts: "What is the connection between the natural fact that an action is a piece of deliberate cruelty [...] and the moral fact that it is wrong? It cannot be an entailment, a logical or semantic necessity. Yet it is not merely that the two features occur together. The wrongness must somehow be 'consequential' or 'supervenient'; it

is wrong because it is a piece of deliberate cruelty. But just what *in the world* is signified by this 'because'?" (Mackie 1977, p. 41). It is difficult or perhaps (at least according to Mackie) even impossible to connect the occurrence of a natural event with an objectively moral value. Importantly, "It is fairly easy to confuse the way in which a thing's desirability is [...] objective with its having in our sense objective value." (Mackie 1977, p. 43).

The merit of Mackie's perspective is its critical assessment of purportedly objective values. It may be warranted to observe that objective values cannot be found, but concluding that stating that there are objective values is *false* (Mackie 1977, p. 40) is not. As I pointed out, Mackie characterises his theory as moral scepticism, but it may more aptly be named 'moral criticism', as scepticism would amount to suspension of judgement with respect to the truth or falsehood of the statement (or, as in the case of academic scepticism (in the sense of the scepticism taught in the (third) Academy), that knowledge is impossible, so that the truth or falsehood cannot be determined). He does—rightly—maintain that what he calls moral scepticism is a *negative* doctrine (Mackie 1977, p. 17) and an ontological thesis (Mackie 1977, p. 18). Actual scepticism, however, does not provide a basis for some of Mackie's conclusions. At the same time, taking his criticism seriously has important consequences in terms of justification for those who would defend the thesis that objective values exist.

3 | The Epistemological Challenge

Given the sceptical outlook in which the previous section resulted, the existence of objective values cannot be ruled out, and an account such as Nietzsche's, who likens morality to alchemy, is accordingly unwarranted.⁴ However, the other side of the coin is that it is unclear how their existence may be proved if that is possible at all.

Suspension of judgement with respect to the existence (and meaning) of objective values leaves the possibility open for a religious outlook, or at least an outlook similar to a religious one. After all, absent epistemic access to objective values, a belief in their existence (and meaning, taken both in the sense of 'sense', so how they are supposed to be interpreted, and in the sense of 'significance', so what their importance may be) is apparently at issue, just as in the case of worldviews that are generally considered religions, such as Christianity. To be sure, objective values are (presumably) no deities (but they might, perhaps somewhat irreverently, be deemed idols). This is no obstacle for characterising objective values as religious items and outlooks that defend their existence as religions (cf. Dworkin 1993, p. 163 ("I can think of no plausible account of the content that a belief must have in order to be deemed religious that would rule out convictions about why and how human life has intrinsic objective importance, except the abandoned notion that religious belief must presuppose a god.") and pp. 155, 156).

One may object that some moral outlooks do not appeal to elements usually associated with religion, such as deities, and that dismissing such elements as irrelevant conflates morality in general and religious morality (or, perhaps more precisely in this context, theistic morality), while an issue such as the

(in)validity of the divine command theory would not be relevant to *all* specifications of morality but only to the latter specification of morality. This objection does not strike at what is germane here, however, as it only means that an element like the divine command theory has no place in all moral outlooks; that given does not provide a basis to conclude that outlooks that do not include an appeal to one or more deities cannot, for that reason, be deemed religious.

The religious nature of a worldview may, then, be said to consist in the given that it appeals to elements (such as objective values) without epistemically justifying that appeal. Such elements may accordingly be said to be metaphysical, with the difficulty that some hold that knowledge with respect to the existence of (some) metaphysical elements is possible, or that metaphysicians themselves at least aspire to knowledge.⁵ It is not necessary, for present purposes, to define 'religion' on the basis of a clearly outlined conception, because what matters here is only the epistemic issue that an appeal is concerned with one or more elements whose (meaning and) existence is not demonstrated and which must, accordingly, be considered articles of faith.

An example of a presumably objective value is 'dignity'. The nature of some elements may be characterised without appealing to metaphysics and/or having a religious outlook, but this does not seem possible in the case of an element such as 'dignity'. The greatest difficulty consists in associating 'dignity' with one or more beings without specifying the criterion that explains the association. A striking example is 'human dignity'; in this case, every human being, simply on account of being human, is supposed to have 'dignity', so regardless of what sort of human being one is (and which actions one performs or fails to perform).

Even if one does not (*arguendo*) problematise 'dignity' itself, using it in this way would not yield anything, as it would not be usable to distinguish between cases to which it might be said to pertain and those in which it would be absent, 'being human' being an arguably random characteristic. After all, if *all* human beings, regardless of what they (are able to) do, have dignity, there hardly seems to be a characteristic to distinguish them, as a group, from some animals (because the cognitive abilities of some of them, on account of certain afflictions or as a result of an accident, do not surpass those of some animals), unless one would be willing to accept certain physical characteristics—like (certain parts of) the human body—to be decisive, but it would be difficult to imagine anyone who takes the task of presenting a discerning theory seriously prepared to include such an apparent artifice in his account, unless he would be willing to define 'human' more narrowly than 'homo sapiens'; failing such a concession, whatever value 'dignity' one would (again, *arguendo*) be willing to grant to have would be seriously affected. The alternative is to identify 'being human' in a nonbiological way, as Kant does, whose viewpoint will presently be discussed.

It is possible to say of *another* element other than 'dignity', which *can* be characterised without appealing to metaphysics and/or having a religious outlook, such as (perhaps) bravery⁶ or generosity, that it is indicative of or tantamount to 'dignity', but it is unclear what 'dignity' would then add to the account in terms of explanatory merit. The foregoing does not entail, of

course, that 'dignity' cannot exist, but it does mean that those who claim that it does cannot simply refer to its existence, as its alleged existence is precisely what is at issue. If they are unwilling to forgo their claim and accept scepticism, they are committed to a religious position.⁷

Kant's position may be mentioned here as an illustration. Kant does not *introduce* 'dignity' as an element of faith but rather maintains that its existence is the result of elements that *are* themselves articles of faith. He presents those elements in the form of postulates (of pure practical reason), which means that they are presuppositions in a necessarily practical respect (Kant 1788/1908, p. 132). These are the immortality of the soul, freedom (of the will) and the existence of God (Kant 1788/1908, p. 132). 'Dignity' is not itself presented as an article of faith (or a postulate) but is rather an element that is supposed to exist (or must supposedly be acknowledged as such) on the basis of something else that is an article of faith, namely, 'autonomy',⁸ which is itself freedom (of the will) (Kant 1788/1908, p. 33).

Importantly, 'humanity' is relevant for Kant in a specific sense; he does not associate humanity with an arbitrary (physical) element (or with cognitive abilities, or, more abstractly, *theoretical* reason), but rather with autonomy (which it shares with other beings that are subject to the moral law, should they exist) (Kant 1788/1908, p. 87). Accordingly, Kant observes: "Morality is the condition under which alone a reasonable being can be an end in itself, since it is only through morality that it is possible for it to be a legislating member in the realm of ends. So only ethics and humanity, insofar as humanity is capable of it, is that which has dignity."⁹

What is gained in Kant's account by not resorting to 'dignity' as an article of faith is, then, shown to be lost once it becomes apparent that it *is* appealed to in that sense *indirectly*, not being introduced on the basis of an epistemic justification of its own but rather by being 'supported' by an element that is itself an article of faith.

Dworkin often appeals to the idea of 'dignity' (e.g., Dworkin 1993, pp. 233–235), but he may also be mentioned here for another reason: he points to the role of 'the sacred' (in determining the value of some forms of life) as something (supposedly) intrinsically valuable. This is expressed thus: "Something is sacred or inviolable when its deliberate destruction would dishonor what ought to be honored." (Dworkin 1993, p. 74). As was indicated (referring to the passages referred to above, namely, Dworkin 1993, pp. 155, 156 and 163), Dworkin adopts a broad conception of 'religion'. 'The sacred' (or the adjective 'sacred') seems to be an example of a religious element in Dworkin's conception of 'religion' as well as my own. Difficult as it may be, Dworkin says: "One of my main claims throughout this book has been that there is a secular as well as a religious interpretation of the idea that human life is sacred. Atheists, too, may feel instinctively that suicide and euthanasia are problematic because human life has intrinsic value." (Dworkin 1993, p. 195).

Dworkin apparently distinguishes between a secular and a religious interpretation of 'sacred', the former constituting a conception atheists may embrace. It is difficult, however, to grasp the secular nature of 'sacred' while acknowledging, at

the same time, its religious nature, unless a diluted sense of 'religion' is intended, but that option seems to be ruled out on account of Dworkin's insistence that religion (as an overarching conception, so the conception that may be said to stand to both variations (i.e., the secular conception and the 'strictly' (so to speak) religious one) as a genus to these two species) is at issue. An alternative would also conflict with the nature of 'sacred' (as Dworkin identifies it). What matters is on what basis one would be able to distinguish between the two conceptions, save for the given—which Dworkin himself acknowledges to be irrelevant—that one includes elements from a worldview traditionally defined as religious (such an element being the existence of a deity) while the other refrains from (or even opposes) doing so.

Other examples may be used to illustrate the point that relying on objective values entails a religious commitment, and the same may indeed be said of those who appeal to the very notion that was discussed at length in the previous section, 'good'; but a sufficient number of them have presumably been used to explain the issue, so rather than burden the reader with unnecessary information, serving no other purpose than repetition, I will use the remaining space to present an alternative to accounts that include religious elements.

4 | Direct and Indirect Self-Interest

An appeal to religious elements is problematic in light of the difficulty or perhaps even impossibility of demonstrating which, if any, exist and may as such serve as the basis of an ethical theory, serving, in turn, as the basis for a moral appeal, so as the basis to decide which actions are to be performed and which are, conversely, to be refrained from.

Insofar as the issue of consensus is concerned, appealing to religious elements need not be problematic (as long as everyone accepts the same religious elements); but, first, some individuals accept different religious elements than others; second, even if there is no disagreement with respect to the religious elements that must be accepted, they may be interpreted differently; and third, some individuals—in contradistinction to others—do not accept any religious elements. In addition, an appeal to religious elements may be said to be wanting insofar as the epistemic justification of one's account is concerned.

Importantly, forgoing such an appeal, or a moral appeal in general, need not result in anarchy, for other accounts and considerations may have the same outcome. The first reason is that people may simply observe rules because their nonobservance may result in punishment, notably on the basis of criminal law. Not all behaviour that is generally deemed unwelcome is criminalised; however, what motivation may exist to abstain from such behaviour and to exhibit other behaviour, which is, conversely, generally deemed welcome, is discussed in this section.

It is worthwhile to consider a perspective such as Garner's, who observes: "[...] our world teems with actual laws, and with conventional rules, understandings, and obligations. As a result, much is forbidden and required – just not by the rules of an objective morality." (Garner 2019, p. 78). In line with this statement,

he says: "Moral error theorists will admit to lacking a moral compass, if that means lacking *moral* reasons for acting, but there are many other types of reasons – ones based on self-interest, self-respect, pride, affection, compassion, love, malice, and whimsy." (Garner 2019, p. 87). It is one of these elements, namely, self-interest, that is, I will argue, decisive, albeit in a specific sense. (The elements Garner lists besides self-interest may, incidentally, on that account be reduced to it.)

Garner uses the following salient example to get his point across: "In the presence of a group of moralists, David is asked for an opinion on baby-punching, and he simply says: "Baby-punching?! Oh, that's just morally wrong". This keeps things simple, and perhaps prudently avoids a discussion of metaethics in a room full of moralists. Still, David could have answered the question put to him by just saying that the thought of baby-punching sickens him, and that should have been enough—unless the person who asked turns out to have been more interested in moral philosophy than in child abuse." (Garner 2019, p. 89, referring to Joyce 2011, p. 16). A similar example is presented by Mandeville: the desire to alleviate the pain of a child is actually motivated by the desire to alleviate one's *own* pain. As he expresses it: "There is no Merit in saving an innocent Babe ready to drop into the Fire: The Action is neither good nor bad, and what Benefit soever the Infant received, we only obliged our selves; for to have seen it fall, and not strove to hinder it, would have caused a Pain, which Self-preservation compell'd us to prevent [...]" (Mandeville 1714/1924, p. 56).

Such examples give rise to a reflection on 'sympathy'. Nietzsche's perspective is again relevant, as he points out, considering that the suffering one experiences when being confronted with the suffering of another must be characterised as compassion, that this is the actual suffering one dispels (Nietzsche 1881/1887/1971, section 133 p. 123). One may experience sympathy when one observes that someone one does not even know suffers. The etymology of 'sympathy' is helpful here. The word 'sympathy' is a compound of—the Greek—'sun' ('together') and 'pathos' ('feeling' or 'suffering'),¹⁰ just as the word 'compassion' stems from—the Latin—'cum' (itself stemming from 'com') ('with') and 'passus' ('to have suffered'). It is, accordingly, the suffering of oneself that is at stake when the suffering of someone else is observed, although the *kind* of suffering may (and presumably does) differ, both quantitatively and qualitatively, the original suffering (presumably) being greater than the suffering experienced by the one who sympathises. It is not unwarranted, on the basis of the foregoing, to conclude, with Nietzsche: "If only those actions are moral, as one has defined it, which are performed on behalf of another and only on behalf of that other, then there are no moral actions!"¹¹

In a case like that of saving a child, the self-interest of the rescuer may be said to be decisive, because his own suffering in coming to the child's rescue is decisive. This perspective does not seem to provide an answer to potential dilemmas, though. For example, if saving the life of a child is only possible at the cost of one's own, then saving it is in one's self-interest (forgoing the issue here that letting the child die will end its suffering) but so is not saving it (presuming one wants to continue living). The conceptual difficulty may be resolved

by distinguishing between direct self-interest and indirect self-interest: direct self-interest is concerned when one's own interests (including reducing one's own suffering) are at issue, while indirect self-interest is concerned insofar as the interests of another are at issue.

This theoretical distinction does not, of course, itself provide the desired answer to the question of how one will act in the case of conflicting interests. What one will actually do depends on the factors that are decisive. If one's own child is in peril, one will presumably (*ceteris paribus*) be willing to sacrifice more than if the child of another is concerned. Another example is that of a soldier who is willing to fight and even die for his country: his *direct* interest is no relevant factor (save for posthumous honours that may be bestowed upon him, presuming they are considerations), but his *indirect* interest is concerned insofar as it is not a random country with which he has affiliated himself (or with which he may be said to be associated in a more fundamental sense, although it is difficult to define this) for which he makes the sacrifice. Not all individuals who are citizens of the same state may be willing to risk their lives for it, possibly on account of, inter alia, some having been brought up with different values, having a different character, or having a different perspective on (the meaning of) life.

The demarcation line between direct and indirect self-interest may sometimes be hard to draw. In the case of someone saving his child at the cost of his own life, this becomes apparent on account of the fact that the child may, in some respect(s), be considered to be a continuation of himself, and in the case of a soldier sacrificing himself because he may—regardless of the fact that he may have a wife and child in whose interests he fights—identify, in whatever way, with his country. In addition, and related to that issue, it is unclear what, if anything, the 'self' means. That matter need not be explored here, however, as the 'self' (in the present analysis) may be used as a placeholder to identify a being (so forgoing (here) an inquiry into the nature of the being in question).

The position I have defended, actions being performed on the basis of either direct self-interest or indirect self-interest, does not amount to an ethical perspective. Specifically, what I have argued cannot be considered a variety of ethical egoism, as ethical egoism prescribes something that is at issue regardless of whether it will actually occur (namely, that one acts in one's self-interest) and is thus superfluous. If the course of action is clear, no prescription is involved because one simply acts without having to reflect (or *further* reflect, in case one has reflected in order to obtain the clarity that is necessary in case it is not evident which option is preferable to all others), but otherwise it consists in the dictate that one acts in a certain way (namely, such that one's interest is served, the only variable, dependent on the individual factors, being that some act on the basis of direct self-interest while indirect self-interest is decisive in the case of others). Nor would it be justified to characterise my perspective as *another* ethical position other than ethical egoism, as such a position, too, is characterised by normative elements, which are moot in my perspective (if 'normative' is associated with morality; if, by contrast, 'normative' and 'prescriptive' are considered synonyms, normative elements exist insofar as the 'norm' is that one acts in one's self-interest).

The position I have taken, the basis of actions being either direct or indirect self-interest, may be characterised as reductionistic, nihilistic or both. Those who would level such criticism would do well, however, in proffering an alternative perspective that is presumably preferable on account of its not being definable by means of such epithets, to make it clear how they are able to steer clear of the problems presented in the previous sections.

A perspective from which criticism might indeed be levelled is ethical constructivism. For the sake of focus I will only discuss Rawls' perspective, presented in what may be considered the *locus classicus* of ethical constructivism, or at least an important representative source, where he indicates that it is characterised by specifying "[...] a particular conception of the person as an element in a reasonable procedure of construction, the outcome of which determines the content of the first principles of justice." (Rawls 1980, p. 516). Importantly, Rawls distinguishes between 'the Reasonable' and 'the Rational', associating the latter with what individuals are trying to advance, which is not, incidentally, to be *identified* as self-interest (Rawls 1993/2005, Lecture II, p. 51), while the former is a decisive element in constructing 'the original position' (Rawls 1980, pp. 528–530), which is instrumental in selecting principles of justice in a well-ordered society, illustrated with the thought experiment of a 'veil of ignorance' (Rawls 1980, pp. 522, 523).

It is not possible to argue in detail why self-interest is decisive here, so I must refer to previous work (see Doomen 2014, pp. 25–30). For the same reason, I refer to previous work insofar as my criticism of the nature of the view that is decisive in realising ethical constructivism is concerned (see Doomen 2014, pp. 159–166), remarking here, though, that what is characteristic of that view is insufficient to establish what Rawls refers to in later work as overlapping consensus (Rawls 1993/2005, Lecture I, p. 39). This is the upshot of thinking through the basic idea of ethical constructivism—in this version of it—that moral facts have no independent, absolute existence (as moral realists claim) but are rather realised on the basis of the—nonimpartial—procedure of construction itself (Rawls 1980, p. 568).

An appeal to indirect self-interest is only necessary in cases where no (possible) enforcement of rules is at issue. Where enforcement *is* at issue, for example in cases where one refrains from committing an action that is forbidden and punishable simply on account of dreading being punished, direct self-interest is decisive, and the case is therefore relatively straightforward. The probability that one is caught is no relevant factor, as it is itself part of the process (motivated by self-interest) that may or may not lead to the action. (The issue of whether a *malum in se* or a *malum prohibitum* is concerned may be forgone here, nor need cases of strict liability, where a motivation is lacking because there is no deliberation, and where *mens rea* is (therefore) no relevant factor, be discussed separately, as they are irrelevant to the present analysis.)

5 | Conclusion

Ethical theories appeal to concepts that need not be problematised as long as one does not reflect beyond the cases in which they may be employed, like 'it is good to give to the poor', or 'stealing

is wrong'; as soon as one does start thinking about (the meaning of) those concepts, however, their elusiveness becomes apparent. There are different ways to respond to that given. Moore's response proves to be elusive itself: the attempt to isolate 'good' in such a way that it may be safeguarded against meta-ethical analyses fails on account of his *presupposing* rather than *demonstrating* that 'good' has a (nonreductive) meaning.

A perspective such as Mackie's seems preferable to Moore's as it does not appeal to the existence of objective values; still, because it does not prove the nonexistence of such values, which cannot, accordingly, be ruled out, scepticism must be substituted for it. Insofar as ontological claims with respect to objective values are concerned, then, nothing conclusive can be said, at least insofar as I can observe. A complementary inquiry was therefore called for. Ethical theories appeal to elements that may be characterised as religious: there is no reason to presume that the justificatory burden to prove the existence of 'dignity', for example, differs from that in the case of proving that of a deity, and a broad conception of 'religion', referring to any worldview that appeals to metaphysical elements on the basis of which a certain creed is expressed, is not different, insofar as the relevant elements are concerned, from ethics. It is not evident that ethical elements have a reference (beyond what is conceived, if 'reference' is used for conceptions); the sceptical outlook amounts to the absence of a criterion to decide which objective value or values, if any, exist.

Importantly, forgoing ethics need not matter in practice. Insofar as actions are concerned that are 'immoral'—whatever meaning this is supposed to have—as well as unlawful, direct self-interest suffices for their being performed, presuming that enforcement is not an issue and the actor is rational; the actor may be presumed to want to avoid (the outcomes of) legal proceedings. To the objection that actors need not be rational, I would respond that they need not be motivated by moral considerations, either, and rationality is at least a straightforward factor.

Where, conversely, such actions are *not* also unlawful, the actor will be motivated by indirect self-interest. The outcomes may not be *precisely* the same in all cases (which is why I said 'need not' rather than 'do not' matter in practice), but in those cases where indirect self-interest is said not to suffice—and a moral appeal is thus still considered necessary—the burden of proof is on those who appeal to ethical elements to demonstrate that such an appeal is justified.

Endnotes

¹ "[...] jeder Philosoph hat bisher geglaubt, die Moral begründet zu haben; die Moral selbst aber galt als "gegeben". Nietzsche 1886/1968, section 186 (pp. 107, 108). Cf. Nietzsche 1881/1887/1971, preface, section 3 (p. 4). In the case of quotes, the original spelling has been used throughout; Nietzsche's and Kant's texts were composed prior to the German spelling reform at the beginning of the 20th century, and the spelling in the case of Mandeville deviates from present-day spelling.

² The shift is expressed, inter alia, in the following formulation: "[...] if teleological realism is true, then we have reason to do *whatever* is morally required, rather than only to do the things that are *actually* morally required: in other words, we have reason to do what is morally required, on a *de dicto* rather than a *de re* reading of that claim." (Zhao 2020, p. 655).

³ Cf. Cuneo 2008, p. 178: "[...] quasi realism [*sic*] is not a unified position but admits of multiple variations."

⁴ "I deny morality as I deny alchemy; that is, I deny their presuppositions, but *not* that there have been alchemists who believed these presuppositions and acted accordingly. I likewise deny immorality, but *not* that countless people *feel* themselves immoral, but that there is basis in *truth* to have this feeling. I do not deny, which is evident—presuming that I am not a fool—that many actions that are called immoral are to be avoided and to be opposed, and that many actions that are called moral are to be performed or encouraged, but I mean both, from other considerations than those which have prevailed hitherto." ("Ich leugne [...] die Sittlichkeit wie ich die Alchymie leugne, das heisst, ich leugne ihre Voraussetzungen: *nicht* aber, dass es Alchymisten gegeben hat, welche an diese Voraussetzungen glaubten und auf sie hin handelten. – Ich leugne auch die Unsittlichkeit: *nicht*, dass zahllose Menschen sich unsittlich *fühlen*, sondern dass es einen Grund in der *Wahrheit* giebt, sich so zu fühlen. Ich leugne nicht, wie sich von selber versteht—vorausgesetzt, dass ich kein Narr bin –, dass viele Handlungen, welche unsittlich heissen, zu vermeiden und zu bekämpfen sind; ebenfalls, dass viele, die sittlich heissen, zu thun und zu fördern sind, – aber ich meine: das Eine wie das Andere *aus anderen Gründen, als bisher.*") Nietzsche 1881/1887/1971, section 103 (p. 89).

⁵ Moore observes: "I call those philosophers preeminently 'metaphysical' who have recognised most clearly that not everything which *is* is a 'natural object.' 'Metaphysicians' have, therefore, the great merit of insisting that our knowledge is not confined to the things which we can touch and see and feel." (Moore 1922, section 66 (p. 110)). He complements this by saying: "If [...] we are to define 'metaphysics' not by what it has attained, but by what it has attempted, we should say that it consists in the attempt to obtain knowledge, by processes of reasoning, of what exists but is *not* a part of Nature. Metaphysicians have actually held that they could give us such knowledge of non-natural existence. They have held that their science consists in giving us such knowledge as can be supported by reasons, of that supersensible reality of which religion professes to give us a fuller knowledge, without any reasons." (Moore 1922, section 66 (p. 111)).

⁶ Cf. Cicero 44 BCE/1913, I, 27 (pp. 96, 97): "Quod [...] viriliter animoque magno fit, id dignum viro et decorum videtur, quod contra, id ut turpe, sic indecorum." "What is done in a manly and courageous spirit seems becoming to a man and proper; what is done in a contrary fashion is at once immoral and improper." The term 'dignus' (declined here as 'dignum'), translated here as 'becoming', may be said to be (merely) reflective of what can actually be determined to exist.

⁷ The idea of 'dignity' is critically discussed in Doomen (2016).

⁸ "Autonomy is the basis of the dignity of human and every reasonable nature." ("Autonomie ist [...] der Grund der Würde der menschlichen und jeder vernünftigen Natur.") Kant 1785/1903, p. 436.

⁹ "[...] Moralität [ist] die Bedingung, unter der allein ein vernünftiges Wesen Zweck an sich selbst sein kann, weil nur durch sie es möglich ist, ein gesetzgebend Glied im Reiche der Zwecke zu sein. Also ist Sittlichkeit und die Menschheit, so fern sie derselben fähig ist, dasjenige, was allein Würde hat." Kant 1785/1903, p. 435.

¹⁰ The phoneme/n/has changed to/m/through the phonological process of regressive assimilation.

¹¹ "Sind nur die Handlungen moralisch, wie man wohl definiert hat, welche um des Anderen willen und nur um seinetwillen gethan werden, so giebt es keine moralischen Handlungen!" Nietzsche 1881/1887/1971, section 148 (p. 137).

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